WORSHIP SERVICE

EVANGELISM AND JUSTICE CONSULTATION

PRE-GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JUNE 3, 1991

MEDITATION BY

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

The texts, Rich Killmer called to tell me, are Psalm 113, Isaiah 61:1-4, and Luke 5:17-24. Would you reflect on the, he asked, and bring to the task your own hermaneutic of justice and evangelism? And my initial response I think was to ask if this was a homiletical assignment for the next year, perhaps. "No" he said - about four minutes.

So - they say it... When you establish justice - you are speaking an evangelical word. When you evangelize - which I take to mean representing what we know about a God who is revealed in Jesus Christ to human beings - that

evangel is inevitably about justice.

There is just no way to put scripture in the center of things and avoid that conclusion. No that we haven't tried.

The Psalmist moves from praise to social action without missing a beat... the God who is worshipped is in the business of raising poor people from the dust, the needy from the ash pile and making a place for them to sit at a royal banquet table.

The prophet brings Gospel to a literally captive people and for them good news is that they will soon be free of their captivity...

As familiar as all that is it is the Gospel narrative that having Christian faith gets us - both on our knees in front of Jesus - but also perspiring a bit with the hard work of justice...

Four people carry their paralyzed friend, bed and all, to see Jesus, the source of the health he needs.

Prevented from accomplishing their goal, they

persist - haul him up on the roof - remove a part of the roof and let him down, a surprise descent into what must have been a startled company. I couldn't help but muse then Luke gives us the gentle, sanitized version, more suitable for us Presbyterians. The four "remove tiles" he says and I see them stacking them in order, maybe even cataloging them, and planning to restore them later. Mark says they dug a hole through the roof... destroyed the structure which stood between their friend and his situation, a version suitable for the more strenuous social activists. If Luke is reformed, Mark is revolutionary here.

The real shocker is that Jesus recognizes what they have done as faith... sees their faith... sees their commitment to their brother, sees their determination to let nothing interfere with his getting to the level of his hope and wholeness - sees their sweat and love and dirty hands... as "faith" and then says to the paralyzed man "your sins are forgiven." A few minutes later to make a

point about authority, he adds physical healing.

Bill Coffin thinks the point of this is what happens next - i.e. the paralytic gets up and walks away. "If it's hell to be guilty, its scary to be responsible" he wrote and imagined himself on the stretcher when Jesus says "rise, take up your bed and walk," imagines himself saying "Aah - no thank you, I rather stay right here on the mat."

But what really strikes me here is that Jesus calls faith - that combination of love, loyalty and work which gets the paralyzed brother through the roof and into Jesus presence.

It's the two together - the synergism - the wholeness.

He taught us that love received isn't really received until it begins to make lovers of us.

It was Jesus who stimulated Paul Tillich to teach that if you try to talk about love without justice, what you're talking about isn't love - might feel good, might fill up your pews and offering plate - but isn't the love he himself was

and is.

So I have to believe and propose that among the spiritual hungers the church is called to address is this profound hunger to be loved and that what he told us was that we are to show, teach, demonstrate and declare that the way to taste it, to experience that love is to put it to work.

I dare to think that knowing that has been our genius - the part of the Gospel we have been commissioned to steward for the whole church and world.

And I believe it and proclaim to you because one day Jesus looked up at a hole punched in the roof and saw four faces peering down at him, sheepishly - perspiration dripping, a little dirty and out of breath - and said, "Now that's what I call faith!"